

BUILDING ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY: HOW THE OCEAN COMMUNITY CAN CONNECT MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

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Total budget requested: \$375,100

Proposed start date: September 2007

Proposed end date: September 2010

The Ocean Project works to increase ocean and environmental literacy through our Partner network of over 800 of the Nation's premier informal science education institutions – including zoos, aquariums, museums and conservation organizations – collectively serving nearly 200 million people each year. This is the most extensive network ever formed for advancing ocean literacy; our aim is to determine what must be communicated to increase awareness and stimulate behavior change. In 1999 The Ocean Project completed what remains the most comprehensive opinion research on public attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of the ocean ever conducted. The research identified a broad vacuum in public understanding of the ocean; a fundamental issue of ocean literacy. Our survey provided our Partners and the ocean community with the tools to be more effective educators in building ocean literacy.

To further increase effectiveness in building ocean literacy we must increase our understanding of how Americans relate to the ocean. We will update and strategically expand our research to develop a more highly detailed database of public awareness, knowledge, and attitudes, and develop recommendations to enable free-choice learning educators to build ocean literacy more effectively in their visitors. Re-testing the 1999 findings will measure changes that have occurred and provide a more comprehensive metric for the future evaluations. These data will be essential as the institutions, agencies and organizations of the ocean community work together and independently to engage people, inform decision-makers, and enhance ocean literacy throughout our Nation. We will work closely with representatives from our NOAA partners and members of The Ocean Project's Leadership and Advisory Councils, which include some of the country's leading scientists, educators, and communicators.

The study will include a comprehensive review of existing literature, qualitative and quantitative research, analysis of the data, and publication and broad dissemination, including recommendations for programs and content that build ocean literacy. The *qualitative* research will help us better understand the motivations, psychology, and emotions behind segments of the public's attitudes toward the ocean and will be used to design the quantitative survey instrument. Traditional focus groups, as well as more modern online discussion groups, will be used. Online surveys are increasingly being used as a cost-effective method for acquiring information to answer strategic communications questions. Thus, for the *quantitative* research we will conduct Internet-based survey work using representative samples drawn from online panels.

Disseminating the results to our Partner network and other agencies and institutions, and fostering the integration of the findings into their programs is vital. In the second phase, The Ocean Project will embark on a two-tier communications strategy:

1. Broad communication of the findings to all our Partners to make them aware of the results and engage them in integrating the findings into their educational and communications efforts.
2. Focused communications in 10 metropolitan regions to help our Partners fully incorporate the findings through their exhibits and educational programs. These programs will then be shared in detail with the larger network. This work will significantly increase the capacity of staff at these institutions to effectively reach their millions of visitors with content that builds ocean literacy.

This strategy will increase the capacity of the ocean community to develop as more effective voices for the ocean, the environment, and conservation, and to assist them in building an ocean literate society.